History of Judaism
BBC Website

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This article forms a broad overview of the history of Judaism, from its beginnings until the present day.

On this page
• History of Judaism until 164 BCE
• History of Judaism 63BCE-1086CE
• History From 1090 to 1600
• History from 1650 to 1860s
• The twentieth century

History of Judaism until 164 BCE
The Old Testament
The history of Judaism is inseparable from the history of Jews themselves. The early part of the story is told in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament).
It describes how God chose the Jews to be an example to the world, and how God and his chosen people worked out their relationship.
It was a stormy relationship much of the time, and one of the fascinating things about Jewish history is to watch God changing and developing alongside his people.
The Bronze Age
Jewish history begins during the Bronze age in the Middle East.
The birth of the Jewish people and the start of Judaism is told in the first 5 books of the Bible.
God chose Abraham to be the father of a people who would be special to God, and who would be an example of good behaviour and holiness to the rest of the world.
God guided the Jewish people through many troubles, and at the time of Moses he gave them a set of rules by which they should live, including the Ten Commandments.

**The birth of Judaism**
This was the beginning of Judaism as a structured religion. The Jews, under God's guidance, became a powerful people with kings such as Saul, David, and Solomon, who built the first great temple. From then on, Jewish worship was focused on the Temple, as it contained the Ark of the Covenant, and was the only place where certain rites could be carried out.

**The kingdom declines**
Around 920 BCE, the kingdom fell apart, and the Jewish people split into groups. This was the time of the prophets. Around 600 BCE the temple was destroyed, and the Jewish leadership was killed. Many Jews were sent into exile in Babylon. Although the Jews were soon allowed to return home, many stayed in exile, beginning the Jewish tradition of the Diaspora - living away from Israel.

**Rebuilding a Jewish kingdom**
The Jews grew in strength throughout the next 300 years BCE, despite their lands being ruled by foreign powers. At the same time, they became more able to practice their faith freely, led by scribes and teachers who explained and interpreted the Bible.
In 175 BCE the King of Syria desecrated the temple and implemented a series of laws aiming to wipe out Judaism in favour of Zeus worship. There was a revolt (164 BCE) and the temple was restored. The revolt is celebrated in the Jewish festival of Hannukah.

**History of Judaism 63BCE-1086CE**

**Roman Times**
For a period, the Jewish people governed themselves again and were at peace with the Roman Empire. But internal divisions weakened the Jewish kingdom and allowed the Romans to establish control in 63 BCE.
In the years that followed, the Jewish people were taxed and oppressed by a series of "puppet" rulers who neglected the practice of Judaism. The priests or Sadducees were allied to the rulers and lost favour with the people, who turned increasingly to the Pharisees or Scribes. These were also known as Rabbis, meaning teachers.

**Year 1: CE**

What is nowadays called the 'Current Era' traditionally begins with the birth of a Jewish teacher called Jesus. His followers came to believe he was the promised Messiah and later split away from Judaism to found Christianity, a faith whose roots are firmly in Judaism.

1 CE - 70 CE: **Rabbinic Judaism**

The Rabbis encouraged the Jewish people to observe ethical laws in all aspects of life, and observe a cycle of prayer and festivals in the home and at synagogues.

This involved a major rethink of Jewish life. Although the Temple still stood, its unique place as the focus of Jewish prayer and practice was diminished. Many synagogues had been founded in Palestine and right around the Jewish Diaspora.

Great teaching academies were founded in the first century BCE with scholars discussing and debating God's laws. The most well known of the early teachers were Hillel, and his contemporary Shammai.

70 - 200 CE: **The destruction of the Temple**

This was a period of great change - political, religious, cultural and social turmoil abounded in Palestine. The Jewish academies flourished but many Jews could not bear being ruled over by the Romans.

During the first 150 years CE the Jews twice rebelled against their Roman leaders, both rebellions were brutally put down, and were followed by stern restrictions on Jewish freedom.

The first revolt, in 70 CE, led to the destruction of the Temple. This brought to an end the temple worship and is still perceived by traditional Jews as the biggest trauma in Jewish history. It is marked by the fast day of Tisha B'Av (meaning the ninth day of the month of Av).

A second revolt, in 132 CE, resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of Jews, the enslaving of thousands of others, and the banning...
of Jews from Jerusalem

200 - 700 CE: The Mishna and Talmud
Between 200 and 700 CE Judaism developed rapidly. Following the twin religious and political traumas, the academies moved to new centres both in Palestine and in the Diaspora. A sense of urgency had taken hold and it was considered vital to write down the teachings of the Rabbis so that Judaism could continue. Around 200 CE, scholars compiled the Mishna, the collection of teachings, sayings and interpretations of the early Rabbis. The academies continued their work and several generations of Rabbis followed. Their teachings were compiled in the Talmud which expands on the interpretations of the Mishna and established an all-encompassing guide to life.

The Talmud exists in two forms. The first was finalised around the 3rd century CE in Palestine, and the second and superior version was completed during the 5th century CE in Babylon.

During this period Jews were allowed to become Roman citizens, but later were forbidden to own Christian slaves or to marry Christians. In 439 CE the Romans banned synagogue building, and barred Jews from official jobs.

The Golden Age " The Jews in Spain
The years either side of 1000 CE were the golden age of the Jews in Spain. Co-existing happily with the country's Islamic rulers the Jews developed a flourishing study of Science, Hebrew literature and the Talmud. Despite an attempt to forcibly convert all Jews to Islam in 1086 CE, this golden age continued. At around this time the first Jews are recorded in Britain.

Top

History From 1090 to 1600
The Crusades
The next Millennium began with the Crusades, military operations by Christian countries to capture the Holy Land.
The armies of the first Crusade attacked Jewish communities on their way to Palestine, especially in Germany. When the Crusaders captured Jerusalem they slaughtered and enslaved thousands of Jews as well as Muslims. Following the example of the Romans earlier, they banned Jews from the city. In Britain, the Jewish population increased, benefiting from the protection of Henry I.

**The bad times return**
The 1100s were a seriously bad period. Jews were driven from southern Spain by a Berber invasion. Serious anti-Jewish incidents began to occur in Europe:

- in France Jews were accused of ritually murdering a child
- in England Jews were murdered while trying to give gifts to the King at Richard I’s coronation
- 150 Jews were massacred in York
- in 1215 the Catholic Church ordered Jews to live in segregated areas (ghettos) and to wear distinctive clothes.

**Expulsions**
In England the Jews faced increasing restrictions during the Thirteenth Century, and in 1290 they were all expelled from England. Shortly afterwards the Jews were expelled from France. In 1478 the Jews in Spain suffered under the Spanish Inquisition, and in 1492 Jews were expelled from Spain altogether. The same thing happened in Portugal in 1497.

50 years later in Germany, Martin Luther (founder of Protestant Christianity) preached viciously against the Jews.

**Scholarship, literature, and mysticism**
But it wasn’t an entirely bad period for Judaism. Scholarship and literature flourished, with figures like Rambam, Luria, Levi ben Gershom, and Eleazar ben Judah. The Jewish form of mysticism, known as Kabbalah reached new heights with the publication in Spain of the Book of Splendour, which influenced Jewish Spirituality for centuries.
History from 1650 to 1860s

Jews return to Britain
This was a period of Jewish expansion. Jews were allowed to return to England and their rights of citizenship steadily increased.
In 1760 the main representative organisation for British Jewry, The Board of Deputies of British Jews, was founded.
Jews were first recorded in America in 1648.

Hassidism
Poland and Central Europe saw the creation of a new Jewish movement of immense importance - Hassidism.
It followed the example of the Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760) who said that you didn’t have to be an ascetic to be holy; indeed he thought that the appropriate mood for worship was one of joy.
The movement included large amounts of Kabbalic mysticism as well, and the way it made holiness in every day life both intelligible and enjoyable, helped it achieve great popularity among ordinary Jews. However it also led to divisions within Judaism, as many in the religious establishment were strongly against it.
In Lithuania in 1772 Hassidism was excommunicated, and Hassidic Jews were banned from marrying or doing business with other Jews.

Persecution in Central Europe
Towards the end of the 1700s Jews began to suffer persecution in central Europe, and in Russia they began to be restricted to living in a particular area of the country, called The Pale.

The birth of Reform Judaism
In the 19th Century another new movement appeared in Judaism. This was Reform Judaism, which began in Germany and held that Jewish law and ritual should move with the times, and not be fixed.
It introduced many changes to worship, and customs, and grew rapidly into a strong movement. It continues to flourish in Europe and the USA.

Good news and bad news
As the 19th century continued many countries gradually withdrew restrictions on Jews—the UK allowed its Jewish citizens the same rights as others by 1860s. But at the same time Jews came under increasing pressure in central Europe and Russia. There were brutal pogroms against Jews in which they were ejected from their homes and villages, and cruelly treated. Some of this persecution is told in the musical show Fiddler on the Roof. In Israel, Jewish culture was having a significant rebirth as the Hebrew language was recreated from a language of history and religion into a language of everyday life.

**Top**

**The twentieth century**

**UK and USA**
In Britain and America this was the century of Jewish immigration, with great numbers of Jewish people arriving to escape the pogroms in Poland and Russia. The Jewish population of Britain increased by 250,000 in 30 years. It was at this time that the East End of London became a centre of Jewish life in Britain. However in 1905 the UK passed a law that slowed immigration to a mere trickle.

**The birth of Zionism**
The Zionist movement, whose aim was to create a Jewish state, was rooted in centuries of Jewish prayer and yearning to return to the land of Israel. Political Zionism began in the mid-19th Century and towards the end of the century it gained strength as many Jews began to feel that the only way they could live in safety would be to have a country of their own. In the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the British Government agreed that a national home for Jewish people should be established in Palestine. Following the First World War, the British governed the region in preparation for a permanent political arrangement. Over the next few years Jewish immigration increased and important institutions were founded such as the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, and the Hebrew University.
The Holocaust
Jewish history of the 1930s and 1940s is dominated by the Holocaust, the implementation on an industrial scale of a plan to wipe the whole Jewish people from the face of Europe. The plan was carried out by the Nazi government of Germany and their allies. During the Holocaust 6 million Jewish people were murdered, 1 million of them children. The events of the Holocaust have shaped Jewish thinking, and the thinking of other people about Jewish issues ever since. War crimes trials of those involved in the Holocaust continue to this day. The tragedy affected much of the religious thinking of Jews, as they try to make sense of a God who could allow such a thing to happen to his chosen people.

The State of Israel
The second defining Jewish event of the century was the achievement of the Zionist movement in the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. There had been strong and paramilitary opposition to British colonial rule for many years, and in 1947 the United Nations agreed a plan to partition the land between Jews and Arabs. In May 1948 the British Government withdrew their forces. Immediately, the surrounding Arab States invaded and the new Jewish State was forced to fight the first of several major wars. Notable among these were the 6-day war in 1967 and the Yom Kippur war in 1973. The first steps towards a permanent peace came when Israel signed a peace treaty with Egypt in 1979, and with Jordan in 1994. For most of its history Israel has had an uneasy relationship with the Arab states that surround it, and has been greatly sustained by the help and support of the USA, where the Jewish community is large and influential. The 21st century began with great political uncertainty over Israel and its relationship with the Palestinian people, and this continues.